

## Employee Spotlight: Jim Stein

September 20, 2016



### Photo finish

As a child, Jim Stein of the Voluntary Protection Program Office loved poring over the awe-inspiring photos of *National Geographic* magazine. With a small camera his parents bought for him, Jim's passion for photography was ignited. "I started playing around with the camera like I was a *Nat Geo* photographer," he says. "And although I really was pretty awful, I've been hooked ever since."

### A photographer's paradise

After spending 10 years in Washington, D.C., Jim returned to his hometown of Los Alamos, where he has worked for the Laboratory since 2004—and where he continues to find the perfect canvas for his art.

"I love mountains. I love canyons. I don't know if there is another place in this country where you have that together, plus the drama we have in our weather," he explains. "I

missed seeing the stars at night in D.C.—you don't see the clear skies we have here in many other places.”

Specializing in capturing expansive landscapes, tumultuous weather, and the deep black night sky, Jim finds Los Alamos and the surrounding area to be a photographer's paradise. The self-taught photographer enjoys the challenge these areas present compositionally—and technically.

“My main passion with photography is experimentation, trying new techniques, not just with taking the photo but with processing it as well,” Jim says.

## **Playing with light**

“I was always fascinated with how light was captured with photography—that's what it's all about—whether it's reflected or directed light, manmade or natural,” he says. If Jim doesn't know how to create an effect, he'll research it and practice until he masters it.

Night photography in particular presents a unique set of challenges with light, but Jim credits today's technological advances in cameras with providing an extensive dynamic range within the digital file for him to manipulate with software. Weather shots are also tricky to capture; for example, when taking a photo of lightning strikes, the camera shutter stays open for a prolonged exposure, which can add distracting visual noise to the image, similar to the grain seen in film photographs.

“With the camera sensors available these days, I'm able to photograph the highly contrasting black, black sky with stars out, and also a foreground,” Jim says. He likes to blend different exposures of the same scene to increase the detail and decrease the noise when processing this type of image.

Jim also likes to digitally stitch several images together into a landscape panorama. With a medium telephoto lens and a device that eliminates parallax error and helps keep the various shots level, Jim takes several photos and compiles a high-resolution-format image electronically.

## **Watching the sky**

As a self-proclaimed meteorology geek, Jim taught himself to track weather patterns so he could be in the right place at the right time to photograph storms. Shooting weather and night scenes requires a level of determination and fortitude to withstand the uncomfortable elements and the late hours, but it's all worth it to Jim.

“Weather here can pop up unexpectedly, so I try not to stray too far from my truck,” he notes. “I've been caught in really close thunderstorms hiking miles away from shelter, and the key is to stick to your route and your plan and not panic when you're out there alone.”

## Giving back to the community

As an event photographer for the Jemez Mountain Trail Run and the Pajarito Trail Fest, Jim has been setting up his camera along the race courses and snapping runners as they come gasping by since the mid-2000s.

Jim spends a lot of time scouting locations to photograph these events. “I get some lighthearted flak from runners who ask why I took their photo while they were running uphill. I then shoot from the downhill side, but the response isn’t much better. There aren’t a lot of flat areas out there,” he laughs. “The people who run in our local events are fantastic and seeing their experience and the positive attitudes out there charges me up to keep doing it every year.”

He donates the profits he makes on photo sales back to the events because he finds the work satisfying and believes the events are great community builders.

## Living life to the fullest

With all the techniques he’s taught himself, Jim finds it challenging to keep the process fresh and not get caught up in the technical planning ahead of time or digital reworking in the studio. “I do a lot more thinking up front now and sometimes it can be paralyzing,” he says. “All you’re doing in reality is taking the lens cap off, focusing, and taking a photo. The challenge is to keep it as free as it used to be.”

Photography for Jim is about pursuing happiness and living his passion. “After both my parents died just over a year ago, I did some introspection about what life is about, and I’ve made a vow to live my life to the fullest,” he concludes. “Photography has helped me do that.”

*Jim Stein is with the Voluntary Protection Program Office.*

---

## Resources

- Find out more about Jim Stein’s photography by visiting his [online galleries](#).
- 

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in the Employee Spotlight articles are solely those of the featured employees and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of Los Alamos National Laboratory.

Los Alamos National Laboratory

[www.lanl.gov](http://www.lanl.gov)

(505) 667-7000

Los Alamos, NM

Operated by Los Alamos National Security, LLC for the Department of Energy's NNSA

